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AUTHOR Dong, Yu Ren
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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the effects on student teachers of peer responses offered through dialogue journals on English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) teacher education. Subjects were nine students in a student teaching seminar, all involved in practicums in public high schools. Over 15 weeks, students wrote journal entries both on selected topics from common readings and discussions and on concerns and reflections arising from practical experience. Students read and responded to each others' journals once a week. The 79 journal entries and 332 peer responses were analyzed for themes and patterns. Results indicate the peer responses: (1) enhance open dialogue and class community building, (2) lead to problem solving, (3) foster collective reflection, and (4) help with the socialization process. It is concluded that peer responses in such a course have rich instructional potential. Teacher trainers are encouraged to create opportunities and model responses for peer feedback, provide focal points for teacher reflection, and adjust instruction based on students' needs and issues as reflected in the journals. Journal excerpts and peer responses are included. (MSE)

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USING COPARTICIPATING AND COREFLECTING: USING PEER RESPONSES TO
DIALOGUE JOURNALS IN AN ESL TEACHER EDUCATION COURSE

Yu Ren Dong

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Department of Secondary Education & Youth Services
Queens College, CUNY

718-997-5171 (office)
718-997-5222 (fax)
yrdqc@qcvax.acc.qc.edu

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Collective Reflection: Using Peer Responses to
Dialogue Journals in A TESOL Teacher Education Course

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INTRODUCTION

- * I think it is good to write our concerns and problems for our classmates and colleagues to read and comment on. Sometimes two or three of us might have the same problem and together we were able to find solutions to solve it. The comments my classmates made were very encouraging and also very useful. I think that all of us had a little to learn from each other.
- * Sharing each other's journals was a real treat for me. I learned many interesting things from my fellow student teachers. Sometimes I read things that I never thought about. So after reading the journals I would try some of the lessons or methods that were mentioned. It was a good experience sharing our journals because we all got to see where each and every one of us stands. Where one is up to, what one is teaching, how one handles his/her classroom. Thank you all for sharing all those wonderful journals!
- * From writing dialog journals and exchanging feedback, I was able to understand the nature of student teaching more. I think that sharing our thoughts and opinions in certain areas of teaching ESL while we were doing student teaching is important. It would be a very good idea to continue this kind of experience with other teachers even after we become teachers. Without having discussions or sharing what they feel about difficulties and success, a teacher may never be able to see themselves. I hope I can continue sharing my problems or ideas with my peer teachers in the future.

The above excerpts demonstrate TESOL (Teaching English to the Speakers of Other Languages) preservice teachers' evaluations of dialogue journals and peer responses used in a semester long teacher practicum course. Dialogue journals have been widely used as an effective tool for both communication and reflection in the practicum course (Brinton, et al., 1993; Numrich, 1996; Richards and Nunan, 1990; Roderick, 1986). Although many studies have been done investigating how the university supervisors help facilitate student teachers' professional growth through dialogue journal writing and responding, little research has touched upon the potential of using peer responses for peer help and the development of student teachers' knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

Usually in a teacher practicum course, students are placed in different schools and observed by the college supervisor several times a semester. Although the student teachers often are required to write dialogue journals, however these journals are shared only between the college supervisor and the student teacher. Students work separate from each other and are seldom offered the opportunity to openly share their thoughts and experiences with their fellow student teachers

(Lortie, 1975). Lave and Wenger (1991) argued that learning would not occur within an individual learner, but occurred in the "situated learning" where master and apprentice as well as other participants participated and collaborated together. They emphasized the important reciprocal role that apprentices can play in their way of learning - "of both absorbing and being absorbed in - the 'culture of practice'" (p. 95). 2

In apprenticeship opportunities for learning are, more often than not, given structure by work practices instead of by strongly asymmetrical master-apprentice relations. Under these circumstances learners may have a space of "benign community neglect" in which to figure their own learning relations with other apprentices... It seems typical of apprenticeship that apprentices learn mostly in relation with other apprentices. (p. 93)

Applying Lave's and Wenger's situated learning theory to student teaching experience, I see an important area of research, though often neglected, on how student teachers draw on their social network, in this case their peers, as an important resource for support, idea developing, advice seeking, and reflecting. This study was designed to explore effects of peer responses offered through dialogue journals on ESL (English as a second language) teacher education. Research questions were: 1) What are effects of effective peer responses on the development of ESL student teachers' knowledge, skills, and attitudes? 2) Is there any evidence that effective peer responses promote collective reflection, if yes, how?

DATA COLLECTION & ANALYSIS

In my student teaching seminar course in Spring 1996, I invited a class of nine students to write a journal entry once a week. They were also encouraged to share and to respond to each other's journals. These nine ESL student teachers were at the end of their program, pursuing the State TESOL certification and doing a practicum at six New York City public high schools. The students spent at least 15 hours per week at their schools and an hour and a half in my seminar. In the course of their 15 weeks' of student teaching, each Monday afternoon, students came into my class sat in a circle, passed around each other's journals, read, and responded to it for the first half an hour minutes. Half of the journal entries were written with focused topics derived from the common readings and discussions to explore critical issues of ESL teaching. The other half involved free exploration of concerns and dilemmas and reflections on successes and struggles in

their school sites. A total of 79 journal entries and 332 responses to these journals were collected during the semester.

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Data analysis included inputting students' journals and the peer responses into the computer database manager, File Maker Pro (1990). Using the method of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), I coded and categorized the data and sought for the themes and patterns. After close examinations of students' journals and their responses over time, I identified several themes and patterns: peer responses enhance an open dialogue and class community building, peer responses lead to problem solving, peer responses foster collective reflection, and peer responses help with the socialization process.

FINDINGS

Peer Responses Enhanced An Open Dialogue And Class Community Building

Given the students freedom to share and respond to each other's journal, peer review opens a channel for an open communication and interaction among students. Student teachers reported a great satisfaction with peer comments received. Sharing and responding to each other's journals provided an opportunity to express themselves openly about ups and downs of their experiences as student teachers. Because of their shared experience as student teachers, feedback to journals became more meaningful. The audience for writing and responding became more concrete and real. The affective tone and emotional support they gave and received from each other developed a strong bond and reduced their sense of isolation, insecurity, and powerlessness commonly felt by the beginning teacher, thus creating a sense of class community.

- * Let us not to forget that ... the struggles that we get from student teaching will lead us become a veteran teacher. I hope you enjoy your time in your classroom!
- * Wow! Using real sounds of the rain forest can spark your imagination. It's an excellent way to begin the process.
- * There you go! You will be a good teacher because you are a sensitive teacher!
- * I think this gives you an opportunity to press on your work and eventually it would help you to be a wonderful teacher.
- * This sounds wonderful. Good going. Keep up the good work.

- * I'm happy for you. It seems like you really enjoy teaching them and learning about different cultures. I like to see and want to understand other cultures better.
- * Congratulations! I bet you will be doing OK. And I know this kind of experience challenges and motivates us to work harder and enjoy teaching.

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Peer responses invited an exchange of teaching ideas, techniques, and resources

Peer responses did more than just offer positive feedback and support. They facilitated the self evaluation and the self improvement. Through sharing and exchanging information about both successful and unsuccessful lessons, teaching methods, and techniques, students increased their understanding of what successful teaching and what their roles were as new comers in the teaching professional community. Look at the following examples of peer comments:

- * I'm also finding research takes a great deal of time-going to local libraries and the QC library can be quite consuming. My cooperating teacher has been generous with sharing materials with me and I have been able to pull something from different places.
- * It (Grammar in Action 2) sounds great-I would like to see it. We have been using "Focus on Grammar" the high intermediate book from Longman series, also an excellent book.
- * Yes, I know what you mean here. Sometimes I have trouble with that. I'm often inconsistent doing a presentation task, having students pronounce words first and then I start doing it first!
- * That's right. Different students present different variables in the teaching equation! I have had the same experience, (Mike), teaching the same material to three different groups. The difference can be quite striking. It's a challenge too and good experience for when we teach five periods a day!
- * This sounds like something I could have done with my class when we read about volcanoes! Good idea.
- * That's great. I hope to do that as well.
- * I need work in this area! Read my journal!

Peer Responses Led to Problem Solving

An important part of peer responses to journals was to learn problem solving. Student teachers used dialogue journals and peer responses not only for airing problems and difficulties, but also to brainstorm and to scaffold ideas and strategies for solving problems and overcoming difficulties. Faced with each other's difficulties and problems in the context of ESL teaching, students offered rationales for the problems, established and tested the hypothesis, and suggested

possible solutions. The following excerpts of the dialogue journals and peer responses captured these moments of peer help.

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Journal Excerpt:

Carol: It seems that this past week at F. High School went a little smoother in terms of classroom control and time management. There are of course the occasional outbreaks of "out of control" behavior, which I find myself struggled about what would be the appropriate response. An example that happened in class this past week was that every time I turned to write on the board, someone (I pretty much know who started it) would call out in Greek a curse word. I absolutely didn't respond to it. I tried repeatedly to ignore it and go on with the lesson at hand and pretend that I was not bothered at all that I didn't understand. Of course I want this to stop but don't know if my response was sufficient or maybe I should have talked to the student after class.

Peer Response Excerpts:

Sally: Sometimes my class is a bit out of hand, but most of the time it is due to their wanting to participate. I try to figure out the difference between a noisy classroom and a class that is eager to answer your questions.

Beth: Could you get various suggestions from your cooperating teacher? It's not so easy to command respect. I think it takes a lot of firmness and consistency. He sounds like he is looking for attention from the other students.

Jane: Do they know you speak Greek?

Beth: Challenging this privately sounds like a good idea.

Mary: That's what I probably would have done, I agree.

Journal Excerpts:

Jane: (My students) are all well behaved and seem that they want to learn more. They are very respectful to me, and they call me "Miss", I like that. They are very friendly. Most of the time they respond to every question I ask them with a smile. I feel very comfortable with them, although a little nervous to say the wrong thing, or not being able to give the appropriate answer.

Peer Response Excerpt:

Carol: Don't worry about giving the wrong answer, if you don't know something, say you'll look it up, and get back to them.

Journal Excerpt:

Helen: During the lesson, I came across some problems. One of them was my difficulty in pronouncing students' names, especially those of Oriental students. I have to admit that I felt embarrassed by this.

Peer Response Excerpt:

Jane: This happens all the time and the good thing is that ESL students don't mind. Perhaps you could ask them to correct you if you mispronounce their names.

Peer Responses Fostered Collective Reflections

Teaching ESL in an inner city high school added more challenge to a novice teacher. With 6 a dramatically increasing ESL student population, student teachers found themselves grappling with the complexities of the curriculum, encountering students with various social, cultural, economical, and individual differences and needs, and struggling with classroom management. Faced with all these differences and confronted with disparities and dilemmas between what they learned from the courses and what they found in real schools, students used the journal and peer responses to explain and define the disparities and differences, to explore the possible solutions, and to make sense of the school that they were in. By sharing concerns with one another, students formulated a collective knowledge on the major issues, thus improving their professional capability and suitability. Several major issues were identified and explored in students' journals and peer responses including 1) cross-cultural diversity, 2) ESL students' academic needs, 3) self as a teacher, 4) teaching and curriculum.

Reflection on cross-cultural sensitivity

Journal Excerpt:

Beth: Now that I am into second week at B. High School, I am getting to know the students, their names and their cultural backgrounds on a more individual basis. Most of my students are Korean and Chinese. Some are Hispanic, Russian and Pakistani. The girls seem less shy than the boys, who appear reluctant to participate. Some seem even angry at being in the class. A trip to the B. Museum last Saturday enabled me to familiarize myself a little more with Chinese and Korean art and culture, offering me different ways to approach the students from these cultural backgrounds.

Peer Response Excerpt:

Sally: I feel the same way about increasing my own knowledge about cross-cultural literacy. I believe that if I know more about the different cultures of my students, I will be able to accommodate them better.

Jane: This sounds great. I would like to learn more about other cultures also.

The student teachers' growth was evident in their growing perspectives on cultural diversity and their students' needs. Working in culturally diverse settings such as ESL classrooms, they uniformly expressed a desire to experience that diversity and to come up with specific strategies to better meet their students' needs. Peer responses sensitized student teachers to ESL students' native cultures and languages. Probing questions that they asked one another

provoked reflection on literacy issues of first and second language learning outside and inside of the school.

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Journal Excerpt:

Sally: My ESL class consists of 15-16 students. They are all at very beginning level of English. Some students are actually considered to be illiterate. My class is multicultural. I enjoy teaching students of different cultures because it gives me a chance to see and to recognize if culture plays a role in a (student)'s learning.

Peer Response Excerpt:

Sam: Are they (ESL students) illiterate in their native language? If so, I guess that will have a severe impact on their literacy in English. I just read in the article that states just that. It postulates that a variety of factors that operate before a child enters school have an impact on the students' success in school. That the more uses of a student's language before school will greatly benefit this student in school.

Reflection on ESL students' academic needs

For school-aged ESL learners, second language teaching challenges double with the students learning both a new language and academic content as well. What can we do to accelerate ESL students' language as well as literacy learning? Several student teachers ventured out ESL classrooms to observe and to learn about ESL students' learning difficulties in content classes. Here is an exchange of peer responses.

Journal Excerpt:

Mary: It was very interesting for me to observe the science classes, because two of them had students that I observed in a bigger ESL class. I couldn't believe what a dramatic change in behavior they (ESL students) showed in a smaller class... I liked the way the ESL science teacher didn't talk to the students as if they wouldn't understand complex ideas, but just explained those ideas in a more simplified way.

Peer Response Excerpt:

Beth: An interesting experience, it would be good to get the ESL students' perceptions of what goes on in the science classes as well. Do they keep up, fall behind? Perhaps the vocabulary help they get is sufficient enough to get them through.

Reflection on self as a teacher

As time went by, student teachers' views of diversity expanded to include not only linguistic, educational, racial, and cultural differences, but also social, economical, and family differences. Feedback from peers helped student teachers reshape their perceptions of their roles as ESL teachers in an inner-city public school culture. Reflections on self as a teacher revealed that

an effective teacher is the one who identifies ESL students' problems and reaching out to create a community where the learner feels belonged.

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Journal Excerpt:

Carol: I often think about what is the role of an educator--is it to enlighten and inform or is it to provide comfort and security to the student... We are very often encouraged to go through the motions of teaching, taking attendance, asking for homework assignments... We forget how students' personal lives might affect their responses, and what they might consider as their primary concern. Last week as I was collecting homework assignments from a class I helped out in, I was told by a student to go to hell because I demanded a homework assignment. I was really taken aback, by the anger in this student's eyes, I didn't say anything in response to the girl's remark, I just stayed upset for the remainder of the period. As the bell rang, I approached the students, and calmly asked "Did I ever do anything to you?" "Haven't I been nice to you in class? Why did you speak to me in that way?" What happened next was totally unexpected: tears streamed down this girl's face as she began to apologize to me. "I'm sorry Miss, but my stepmother locked the door last night I slept in the street; I don't know where to go." My heart softened as I heard these words and here I was asking about her homework. The Assistant Principal of the department contacted the parents and the girl was able to go home.

Reflection on teaching and the curriculum

Writing the journal and responding to the journal offered student teachers a chance to reflect on daily teaching practice and the principles that governed their instructional decisions and lesson planning; which in turn, brought them to a realization of the complex nature of teaching. This thinking process to make a connection between theory and practice led the student teachers to gain a deeper understanding of what teaching and learning was all about. Drawing on the teacher

Peer Response Excerpt:

Sam: It's interesting that we often don't know what is going through the minds of our students!

Mike: Yes, I'm glad you overcame this kind of difficulties. You'll be a good teacher.

Jane: You're right. Very often we forget about their lives and we continue to do what we are supposed to do. I'm glad her problem was solved.

Beth: Yes, (Carol), the student's personal lives can affect them and even overwhelm them at times. Because of the way you approached her, you were able to make a positive difference! Good for you!

education literature Sam generated a reflection which was shared and verified by his peers as follows.

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Journal Excerpt:

Sam: It was interesting to read in chapter 4 of *"Reflective Teaching"* about how teachers decide on what to teach and the planning decisions that go into a lesson. In my classes I often make decisions based on that material. I have focused on different objectives and employed different activities consistent with the nature of each reading. For example, in the Mt. St. Helens article, I found it useful to use a graphic organizer to distinguish between outcomes and reasons while in the Pomperri reading there are interesting inferences for the students to make concerning what remains there and how that shows the lifestyle of ancient Romans. On p. 82, of *"Reflective teaching"* there is a list of questions posed that can help a teacher plan for all of the contingencies of a lesson. When I read over all of these questions, many of which I attempt to deal with in lesson planning, I realize how complicated teaching is and how much teachers must consider in order to come up with a good lesson!

Peer Response Excerpt:

Carol: Good planning and experience of what works and what doesn't!

Beth: It takes a lot as I am finding out each day I student teach. What you are doing sounds substantial and interesting as well as conducive to building up critical skills!

Jane: That's right. It takes a lot of planning and decision making when writing lesson plans.

Based on their collective reflections on teaching and learning, these student teachers began to inquire about teaching and the ESL curriculum. Writing these questions to each other enabled the student teachers to shape, to expand, and to reinforce their knowledge about ESL teaching profession.

Journal Excerpt:

Beth: After my first few sessions of "teaching," I understand that learning to teach is really a process of integration, not unlike learning a new language or adapting to a different culture. All I see now is a lot of bits and pieces. How does it all fit together? It seems like a juggling act each time-taking care of administrative duties, purpose, and confidence, being mindful of group and individual dynamics, maximizing the time allotted for tasks. Right now, it seems like a tremendous challenge.

Peer Response Excerpt:

Mary: I asked myself the same question as I observed the ESL teachers. I wondered what criteria they use to plan their lessons for the whole semester so that each one is tied with another.

One of the student teachers compared her student teaching field experience to going to a foreign country where you did not share a common language and a culture with the people in that country. You had to accept or reject, accomodate or modify new things, reshape your own belief systems. Through participating in the actual teaching, the student teachers gained first-hand knowledge about the school culture, including how to manage a class of ESL students, how to transform content knowledge into classroom tasks, and how to motivate the students to learn. The mentor, the cooperating teacher in this case, served a critical role in helping the student adapt successfully to the environments and exigencies of a school culture. The importance of achieving a balanced cooperating teacher and the student teacher relationship was articulated by several student teachers as follows.

Journal Excerpt:

Sally: I have to start off by saying that I have no complaints about my cooperating teacher. The two of us get along together so well that one would think we've known each other for years. Our relationship right from the start was a reciprocal one. She influences me and my teaching, as well as I influence her and her teaching. We are both open and tell each other what we think about each lesson we plan. We both give and received important information. Heather (my CT) always tells me things concerning the school, while I keep her up to date with "new" things that I'm learning in school. I pay close attention to Heather when she teaches. and I take good notes. She has a lot of wonderful techniques and how to motivate her students. We both inform each other after the lesson or during what we should do to hold our students' attention. I have to say that Heather is very supportive. Even if I don't think that my lesson plan went well, she'll give me a positive response to it.

Peer Response Excerpts:

Helen: I don't have a very open relationship with my cooperating teacher. My cooperating teacher tells me little about things concerning the school.

Mary: Mary, this is wonderful that you have a good cooperating teacher. I think, while doing student teaching, it is important to have a good CT. It sounds like you are learning a lot from her and vice versa.

Carol: I am glad that you have a good cooperating teacher.

In this intensive professional training, a novice, the student teacher, learn through participating in the actual practice of an expert, the cooperating teacher. A part of this learning is

culture learning. Students' journals and peer responses prevailed the powerful socialization pressures of the school culture and the student teachers' doubts and confusions as well as satisfaction in their socialization process.

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Journal Excerpt:

Carol: I feel very lucky to have a very good CT what do I mean by "very good" is the fact that she gives advice and recommendations without giving an undertone of inadequacy. In the very beginning of the semester one day, I was extra nervous with my self confidence and extra low. I didn't feel like I could do the lesson, I feel that she realized this and approached me very carefully and whispered to me, "One of the students just told me that you are a very good teacher." I don't know if this actually took place or not, but it gave me the boost I needed in that moment and I was able to have a very good lesson. Psychology not only works on students but also on teachers.

Journal Excerpt:

Jane: My cooperating teacher is very friendly with some cultures only. I wish all of her students would get the same treatment.

Journal Excerpt:

Beth: (My cooperating teacher's) teaching style, while it works very well for her I find it a difficult one for myself. While I understand the rationales for structure and routines in a class of beginners educationally, I still see the class as too regimented in some ways. There are issues of power and control which I find difficult to deal with. This highlights for me the intensely individual nature of teaching and learning as well.

Peer Response Excerpts:

Helen: I guess that we all get very nervous before we teach, but we must pretend that we're not.

Beth: Trust is so important in that relationship.

Sam: She seems to be very sensitive! That's great!

Sally: Isn't it great to have someone like that to help you? What are you going to do later on when you're on your own?

Peer Response Excerpt:

Mary: This is bound to happen, especially whom the teacher is bilingual. He/she will use that language in class. But what about other languages?

Beth: I wonder if she realizes she is doing this and the possible effects on her students. Young people are keenly aware when preferential treatment is given to anyone. This is difficult.

Peer Response Excerpts:

Sam: I guess this reflects your differing philosophies. Perhaps you cooperating teacher feels that if she doesn't maintain control anarchy will prevail.

Jane: This may just have something to do with personality.

Journal Excerpt:

Helen: Since the beginning of student teaching, I have felt uncomfortable going to the teachers' cafeteria. All I hear the minute I walk in is gossip about other teachers. Not only that, but I didn't know that teachers also curse.

Peer Response Excerpts:

Mary: I like going because I see that they are real people. I get to hear about all the horror stories and this way I know what to expect.

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Helen: I feel uncomfortable in teachers' cafeteria as well because I have an impression that everyone recognizes me as a stranger.

Beth: That would make me uncomfortable too. Maybe you could find a way to meet friendlier teachers in the school with whom you'd have more in common.

CONCLUSION

As an ESL teacher educator, I believe my analysis of the student teachers' dialogue journals and their responses to each other offers insights into some of the unobservable factors affecting their student teaching experience. I see the great potential for integrating peer responses into a teacher education course. The effects of effective peer responses on ESL student teachers' development of their skills, knowledge, and attitudes identified by the study have shown that peer responses can be used as an important tool in learning to teach in the unique context of ESL teacher training. Faced with such a diverse student body and double challenges of not only teaching the language but also teaching the academic content at the same time, ESL student teachers used peer responses to encouraged each other, to identify ESL students' needs, to learn about the public school culture, to inquire about the curriculum, and to reflect on themselves as ESL teachers.

This study is in small scale, however, it does suggest several rich potentials for using peer responses in the teacher practicum course. Drawing on the findings of my study, I would like to suggest the following guidelines for teacher trainers in their attempts at using peer responses in the TESOL teacher training course.

1. Create opportunities and model the responses for peer feedback. Assign time for peer responses for each meeting. Students should be encouraged and modeled to respond to each other in a positive manner.

2. Focus on using peer responses as a learning tool. Structure focal points for teacher reflection through reading the literature, class discussions, and students' own questions and concerns. 13
- Student teachers should be encouraged to actively reflect on their experiences by making connections between what they learned in class and what they found out in their teaching sites.
3. Teacher trainers can learn from peer responses also, and reshape the teacher education course based on students' real needs and centered around the issues that they consider as most important.

Peer responses have enabled my students to articulate "the relations between the newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artifacts, and communities of knowledge and practice" (Lave and Wenger, 1991; p. 29). They also enabled me to re-examine the teacher training program and my own way of teaching. For example, one of my focuses, in my methods course to prepare our students for their field work, is on content area instruction. Peer responses made me realized that inter-disciplinary networking and resources were needed to provide the students opportunities to go into the field and identify some of the academic challenges and ESL students' difficulties that we have talked about in class. Also, peer responses and dialogue journals offered me insights into not only ESL students' linguistic and sociocultural needs, but also their educational and personal needs. All these led me to reflect and think about the possibilities for changes in the future.

The findings of my study suggest that the socialization process of becoming ESL teachers is not simply an one-way knowledge transmission in a static fashion; rather, it is a two-way dynamic transformation in which students use peer responses to "invite reflection on ongoing activity and for the newcomer's occasional contributions to be taken into account" (Lave and Wenger, 1991; p. 117). In a class where student teachers have something to share and to learn from each other and where critical thinking is encouraged, learning becomes a coparticipation in the teaching practice and both the teacher and the learners become knowledge constructors of the educational experience (Roderick, 1986).

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